Newsweek
Time Pg. 30
U.S. News & World Report
Date 13 MAR 1989

Smart, Dull And Very Powerful

SAM NUNN, John Tower's nemesis, has never flirted with charisma, but built a strong Senate presence on expertise, instinct and understated toughness

BY MICHAEL KRAMER

For Sam Nunn, who believes that the tests of private relations and public life cannot be different simply because it is impossible to split a whole person in two, it was a painful admission. A few days before Nunn would lead the charge against John Tower on the Senate floor, the 50-year-old chairman of the Armed Services Committee sat in his office under the influence of two diet Cokes and finally confessed that he once stole some eggs from a neighbor who kept chickens.

That was around 40 years ago in Perry, Ga., the small town about a hundred miles south of Atlanta where Nunn grew up at a time when the movies cut away to pounding waves whenever a couple embraced. A lot has changed in Perry, but along Sam Nunn Boulevard, where just about every fast-food chain known to man has an outlet, there is still a statue of a Confederate soldier pointing North, and farther along a billboard that says COME FOLLOW ME—JESUS CHRIST. (Back when Nunn was in school, his class would regularly break for a period of religious instruction at a church across the street. "That was before anyone realized it was unconstitutional," says Nunn.)

"Yeah, I took the eggs," said Nunn last week. "It was a scheme to make some extra cash"—a plan too clever by half. Even then, Nunn prepared his moves carefully, cautiously. A cooling-off period was decreed. The eggs were stashed in the attic of Sam's home. "But I never realized they'd rot," said Nunn. "It was theft without profit."

And that's about it when you go looking for dirt on Sam Nunn. Oh, sure, he's accepted some modest honorariums from defense contractors, and Perry and Georgia are not hurting for military contracts, and there was also the time, when he was 26, that Nunn got loaded at a party and sideswiped a car and pleaded guilty to leaving the scene of an accident and paid a $100 fine. That one made the papers again last week when Tower partisans were dredging up anything they could find "on" Nunn. "Well, that *is* something, isn't it?" says a senior White House aide, who will speak only on background because it doesn't take a genius to realize that Sam Nunn is going to be around long after George Bush has retired to Kennebunkport.

One point to the Bushies: Sam Nunn is not a saint. But he is perhaps the nation's most widely respected Senator, and it is his opposition to Tower, more than anything else, that is likely to doom the would-be Defense Secretary. And no matter who rules the Pentagon, it is fair to say that few major national-security decisions will be made without Nunn's approval. He is that powerful.

Luck, hard work, some powerful connections and a willingness to gamble. That's how Nunn has risen so far so fast. The eggs aside, Nunn breezed through Perry High, Georgia Tech and Emory University law school. He was an Eagle Scout and a star forward who led Perry's high school basketball team to the 1956 state championship. "We were behind by 5 points at the half," recalls Ed Beckham, a Perry oil distributor. "Our coach was one of the winningest in the nation, but it was Sam who gave us the half-time pep talk."

Nunn absorbed politics by osmosis. His father, a lawyer and farmer, was mayor of Perry and a campaign manager for other, full-time politicians. His great-uncle was the legendary Carl Vinson, who served in the Congress for 50 years, 14 of those as the brook-no-dissent chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Politics, in other words, was everywhere.

After a brief stint as Uncle Carl's congressional counsel, Nunn returned to Perry and won election to the state house in 1968. Three years later his goal was to create a new congressional district, for which, naturally, he would run. But a man named Jimmy Carter was Governor, and Carter favored a different reapportionment scheme. Let down by Carter, whom he had supported for years, Nunn challenged the man Carter appointed to the U.S. Senate. "I was only 33 then," says Nunn, "a junior legislator. Even Uncle Carl said I couldn't win, but I felt I had to try. I gave up a seat I probably could have held forever and took a chance." And won.

That was in 1972, and Nunn proved then that he can play politics with the best of them. With Uncle Carl's help, Nunn visited Washington and was able to tell Georgians that if he was elected he would be put on the Armed Services Committee. I have "assurances," he said cryptically. By primary day, Nunn had the support of both arch-conservative

CONTINUED

Lester Maddox and black activist Julian Bond. After defeating Carter's man—a Harvard-educated lawyer whom Nunn chided for being "too used to air-conditioned rooms in Eastern Ivy League schools"—Nunn faced a conservative Republican in the general. The great coup, the stroke that many say put him over, was Nunn's enlistment of Alabama Governor George Wallace as a public supporter of his candidacy. Nunn's memory of that ploy is somewhat selective. "You have to keep the context in mind," says Nunn—a "context" that also caused him to attack the "dictatorship created by lifetime tenure of federal judges." "After the primary," says Nunn, "Maddox was leaning toward supporting my Republican opponent, who was running an ad showing George McGovern with Coretta King over a line about how they were warming Georgia up for me. I counteracted that with Wallace. It was no big deal, and I didn't get involved in actually supporting Wallace for President."

Well, actually, Nunn *was* "talking up" Wallace for President—and *before* the threat of Maddox's bolting was perceived. "Without George Wallace on the national ticket," said Nunn before the Senate primary, "the Democrats cannot win. I fervently hope he will be on the ticket."

Despite commendable work on race relations and the support of black liberals like Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, statements like these—and a generally conservative voting record—could cripple Nunn if he seeks the 1992 Democratic presidential nomination. He considered running last year but pulled back primarily because his two children were still in school. "They'll have graduated by '92," says Bill Jerles, a Perry dentist and close friend. "Sam has those presidential thoughts in mind all the time."

Something else must happen if Nunn is ever to become President. Americans will have to fall out of love with charisma. The words that define Nunn are "serious" and "studious." Thirty-second sound bites are not his forte. He once turned down a chance to appear on national television to speak about defense policy in response to President Reagan because the time allotted "wasn't enough to do justice to the subject."

Nunn's Senate tenure reflects an eclectic mix of interests. National security is his primary focus, of course, and the keys to his influence are knowledge, timing and as little partisanship as possible. "By the time he starts talking about a subject," says Democratic Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, "he knows more about it than anybody else." "His real genius," says Republican William Cohen of Maine, "is to wait for the right moment to come up with a solution after allowing the sides to play themselves out."

The Tower debate aside, Nunn's essential bipartisanship is almost uniformly accepted by his colleagues. So much so that even before he took over Armed Services, no less a Republican partisan than Dan Quayle called Nunn the "de facto" head of the committee even though it was chaired by the G.O.P.'s Barry Goldwater.

Nunn was a man to reckon with almost from the day he entered the Senate. In fact, even before he was sworn in, he took steps to ensure that he'd be ready on day one. He hired a consultant to study the organization of several Senators' offices and had the desktops measured so he could plan his office space most efficiently. Six years later he was holding up SALT II for a Carter Administration commitment to increase conventional-forces spending. "They told me they couldn't think of how to spend more money," says Nunn, still incredulous. "That was what really started SALT II down the drain." But Nunn wasn't implacably hostile. His support of the Panama Canal treaty gave Carter one of his greatest victories. "I think it would have lost if I hadn't gone along," says Nunn. "There were at least two Senators who were waiting to see which way I'd go." (When Nunn boasts, which is rarely, it is almost always at Carter's expense.)

When it came to defense funding, Nunn had a kindred spirit in Carter's successor. But he clashed repeatedly with President Reagan over specific weapons systems. He didn't then, and still doesn't, think there is "anything magical" in the Navy's desire for 15 aircraft-carrier battle groups. He engineered the MX compromise, cut back Reagan's grandiose plans and today favors the single-warhead Midgetman over a rail-based MX. He described as "fantasy" Reagan's dream of a nationwide Star Wars shield and fought the former President's insistence that the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty permitted the expanded testing and development of a space-based strategic defense system.

Even NATO responded to his reach. In 1984 Nunn proposed cutting American troop strength in Europe as a way of forcing the allies to contribute more to the common defense. That threat, says former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, "had beneficial effects." Today, with the Europeans enthralled by Mikhail Gorbachev's peace overtures, Nunn's views have changed. "I wouldn't introduce the same kind of legislation now," he says, "and I don't favor driving the Germans to the wall on [modernizing the short-range] Lance missile. There are ways to keep the nuclear deterrent alive in Europe without getting everyone in an uproar. We could base missiles at sea or on aircraft that the NATO countries already accept."

Closer to home, Nunn virtually echoes Secretary of State James Baker's willingness to deal with Moscow in Central America. "Reagan pretended that the hemisphere is ours," says Nunn, "but the reality is that the Soviets are already major players in Cuba and Nicaragua. There's nothing wrong with acknowledging that reality and trying to fashion a policy that ties Moscow's need for Western credits to a diminution of their support for Castro and the Sandinistas."

Nunn's other passion is his proposal to create a Citizens Corps. The plan would have young people work at community jobs—or serve in the military—in exchange for education grants of $10,000 to $12,000 for each

CONTINUED

year of service. "We have to restore a sense of civic obligation," says Nunn. "Today everything is considered an entitlement." Nunn's national-service proposal has been criticized for discriminating against the poor, a charge Nunn finds "ridiculous . . . The current system isn't working. The dropout rates are horrendous, and $10,000 is more than almost every student could hope to make. It's a benefit, not a penalty."

If all this adds up to a presidential run in 1992, it will not be the first time Nunn has clashed with George Bush—or the second, considering that the fight over John Tower has been cast as a Bush-Nunn feud. In 1975, when President Ford selected Bush to head the CIA, Nunn and Senator Henry Jackson were concerned that Ford was helping Bush audition for a future vice-presidential race, perhaps even with Ford on the '76 ticket. "We felt strongly that the CIA shouldn't be used that way," says Nunn, and "we forced Bush to renounce his ambition."

At first, Bush swore that he would "take no part, directly or indirectly, in any partisan political activity of any kind." But that didn't satisfy Nunn and Jackson. They demanded a more explicit promise. Finally, and over Bush's objections, Ford sent Congress a letter ruling out Bush as a potential vice-presidential candidate. "Yeah, we beat him back then," says Nunn, "but you notice where he's sitting today." As for '92 and an ultimate Bush-Nunn face-off, that could make the present skirmish look like child's play. ■

Declassified in Part - Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2012/05/23 : CIA-RDP99-01448R000401570008-4